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MEMORANDUM

Andropov's Legacy and the Future

President Yuriy Andropov's death at age 69, only 15 months after he became party General Secretary and only six months after he became head of state, finds the regime largely unprepared for a new succession. Although Andropov had accumulated more personal power than any of his predecessors in a comparable period, his tenure was so brief, and his absences from the job so lengthy, that his regime will be known more for what it set in motion than for what it accomplished. The succession choice is not as clear-cut as it was after Brezhnev. Whoever is chosen, Andropov has left him the same unresolved economic, social, military, and foreign problems that confronted him.

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The remaining leaders in the Politburo will move quickly to select a new General Secretary--their choice will be ratified by a plenary meeting of the party Central Committee within a few days. This will be a tough decision to make. All the viable candidates for the top party post have significant liabilities. The issue seems to be whether to opt now for a younger, perhaps more vigorous and longer lasting leadership or to choose a senior leader who will function as a transitional figure, thus once again avoiding a more profound change at the top.

A Tenure Too Short

Continuity was the main theme of both domestic and foreign policies during Andropov's brief tenure. Andropov's own cautious approach in pressing for major changes, the entrenched political opposition, bureaucratic resistance to important policy shifts, and his flagging health made it impossible for him to have a significant impact on Soviet politics or policy.

On domestic issues Andropov focused his attention on the need to rejuvenate the elite and revitalize the Soviet economy, attempting to "get the country moving again," after the lethargy of Brezhnev's last year. Andropov chose administrative measures (the discipline and anticorruption campaigns) to set the tone for his regime and to attain at least a short-

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term gain in productivity. He also strongly endorsed party Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's attempt to refocus Brezhnev's food program on incentives rather than on organizational measures. Andropov's approach, however, was to try to make the system function better rather than to change it fundamentally. His insistence that order and discipline were the prime prerequisites--and his ability to follow through with tough personnel actions--suggests that this approach was agreed to by a core of Politburo members and might continue despite his removal from the scene.

In the foreign policy arena Andropov made no significant departures from Brezhnev's policies. He focused his personal attention on arms control measures and even after the beginning of his lengthy illness assumed a major role in putting forth new Soviet proposals. He took the propaganda offensive in response to NATO's INF deployments. Despite Andropov's foreign policy experience, however, the Soviet Union's international position did not improve during his tenure. In some respects--for example, in relations with West European countries--he bequeaths to his successors a more troubling set of problems than he inherited.

The Succession Process

The decision on a new General Secretary will be made in the Politburo in the next day or so by the senior core of remaining leaders. While a coalition may have already formed "in the corridor," all remaining full Politburo members will vote at a formal Politburo meeting on the succession question. The Central Committee will then quickly meet to rubber stamp their choice. Only in the unlikely event that the Politburo was unable to reach a consensus would the issue be placed before the more than 300 voting members of the Central Committee for resolution.

Less political urgency attaches to filling Andropov's largely ceremonial Supreme Soviet post. After Brezhnev's death the post remained vacant for eight months. While there is no formal requirement to give this post to the new party leader, the precedents established by Brezhnev and Andropov suggest that the Politburo is now inclined to do so.

More importantly, it seems likely that the post of Defense Council-Chairman will also be held by the new party leader. Indeed, while these posts are formally separate, the jobs apparently are intended to go together. Both Brezhnev and Andropov evidently acquired this function when they became General Secretary, although formal announcement was not made in Brezhnev's case for 12 years and Andropov's for six months afterward.

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Key Indicators

An announcement of the plans for Andropov's funeral is expected immediately. Those arrangements and the funeral itself will provide important clues to the identity of the heir apparent and the relative standing of the other leaders. The heir apparent will likely be listed as chairman of Andropov's funeral commission and will probably deliver the eulogy. When Brezhnev died, the announcement that Andropov headed the funeral commission anticipated by a day the latter's formal approval as General Secretary. Should the succession remain unresolved by the time of the funeral which will take place within several days, the funeral commission chairman might remain unannounced, the protocol rankings at the event could be ambiguous, and the leader selected to give Andropov's eulogy might not be his replacement. Such disarray would suggest deadlock.

Best Placed Candidates

Precedent suggests that Andropov's successor will come from the party secretaries who hold voting membership in the Politburo--criteria met now only by Mikhail Gorbachev, Grigoriy Romanov, and Konstantin Chernenko. Given the experience of Brezhnev's last years and Andropov's short tenure, the Politburo will have a logical reason to avoid selecting an older and frail leader again to serve as party boss. Such a choice would have a negative impact on how the system is viewed at home and abroad. Viewed from this standpoint alone, the relatively junior Mikhail Gorbachev and Grigoriy Romanov would be the most likely candidates to attain the top party job.

Andropov apparently was preparing Gorbachev to be his successor. In fact, the Embassy received one report recently indicating that the Politburo had already appointed him to succeed Andropov. Gorbachev evidently was placed in charge of personnel appointments about six months after Andropov took over from Brezhnev, and he reportedly chaired Secretariat meetings in the absence of Andropov.

The Politburo's senior members, however--Ustinov (75), Gromyko (74), Chernenko (72), and Tikhonov (78)--might find Gorbachev too young at 52 to serve as leader over themselves. Moreover, with his background in agricultural management he might not have the support of the important heavy industry, defense-industrial, and military constituencies.

Romanov, at 60, has had little visibility since becoming a party secretary but he is probably perceived by the Politburo as more acceptable to those same constituencies. For example, he has had experience for more than a decade as a manager of a key regional party organization with strong ties to the industrial and military sector. Moreover, Romanov is an

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ideological conservative who has taken a harder line than many of his colleagues on foreign policy issues. In a time of troubles for the USSR at home and abroad, the Soviet leaders may now look to the more conservative candidate as the better choice. Romanov, however, has served only a short time as a national party secretary (since June 1983) and has a reputation for crudeness and unbridled ambition that may hurt his cause.

Chernenko, now 72, has significant liabilities, including ill health. He was passed over last time reportedly because he was actively opposed by such key leaders as Ustinov and Gromyko, both of whom continue to be important players in the Politburo.

The strongest signal that Chernenko nevertheless remains an important factor in the leadership is the highlighting of his position as unofficial party second-in command at the November 1983 anniversary ceremonies and in the December-January honorary nominations to the Supreme Soviet. If his health were to improve--he seems to have emphysema--Chernenko could be the choice of those in the Politburo who are reluctant or unable to choose among the other, more junior candidates for the job. He could also benefit from rivalries among some of the younger contenders, who might prefer his selection rather than see the position go to a strong rival.

Enter the Kingmaker

The lack of ideal candidates in the Secretariat could lead the Politburo to turn to leaders outside it, such as Dmitriy Ustinov, even though such a course would be unprecedented, and despite his age and reported poor health.

Ustinov has the advantages of past experience in the Secretariat (1965-1976) and service in the important military sector. If he and the rest of the Politburo wanted to send a signal that things are under control while recognizing that only an interim choice has been made, they could pick Ustinov. Ustinov might have sufficient personal prestige and Politburo supporters to take the job regardless of the signal it sends. Of course, given his age, such a choice would lead almost inevitably to a more protracted and potentially more controversial succession.

A Dark Horse

Viktor Grishin, whom Soviet officials had mentioned as a possible "compromise candidate" when Brezhnev was being replaced, could again become one. Located in Moscow, he has a definite political advantage over his regionally based colleagues. He too is handicapped by health problems, however, and he is not part of the Andropov coalition.

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Emphasis on Collectivity

Regardless of who is selected to succeed Andropov as party boss, the presence of strong political rivals from the outset--something that Andropov did not have to face--will probably lead to considerable maneuvering in the Politburo, and the new General Secretary's position could be more vulnerable. The age structure of the Politburo might allow a younger candidate to consolidate power sooner, as older members die off, but rivalry among younger leaders would probably be intense.

Nevertheless, the progress Andropov made in consolidating his team at the December plenum could work to the benefit of the new General Secretary. Andropov's closest supporters--Ustinov, Gorbachev, and probably Gromyko--were augmented by the promotions of Solomentsev to the Politburo, Vorotnikov to the Secretariat, and KGB Chief Chebrikov to candidate politburo status. If this group should be able to work together and agree on basic programs, it could give the new leader a core of support.

Prospects for Policy Change

Although the Soviet economy rebounded in 1983 (with GNP growth estimated between 3.5 to 4 percent), the majority of factors constraining economic growth since the late 1970s--declining increments to the labor force, slowing growth of capital stock, raw material shortages, and transportation bottlenecks--will not go away in this decade. Despite the need to take new approaches to deal with these issues, the very complexity of the problems will make it difficult for the post-Andropov leadership to unite on a new approach. Moreover, any significant reorientation of economic priorities would involve painful and politically risky trade-offs between investment, military spending, and consumption.

Because the existing consensus on foreign policy is stronger than that on domestic issues, major changes are even less likely in that area. Besides, Foreign Minister Gromyko clearly played a major foreign policy role under Andropov and his influence in this area is likely to continue. The commitment to sustain the global dimensions of Soviet policy will endure. The new leadership, however, may well wish to renew an arms control dialogue with the US. The price the regime is willing to pay for this will depend on the priorities the new leadership establishes and the degree of unity it can maintain in pursuing its goal.

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